



Disability and The Church

How Kupenda for the Children reaches the largest unreached people group

The Largest Unreached People Group

According to the World Health Organization, “A billion people in the world, 15% of the population, have a disability severe enough that it limits their participation in family, community, and political life.” Research by multiple evangelical organizations has revealed that only five to ten percent of this group of people are included in the outreach of the church. This equates to more than 900 million people without access to the gospel, making them the largest unreached people group today.

Since one-third of the world’s population practices Christianity, these beliefs have a significant influence over the views held by most of the population. Unfortunately, people often lack formal training in biblical knowledge. This contributes to harmful beliefs in the nature of healing prayers and inaccurate perceptions of what causes disabilities. Additionally, an intermingling of Christian beliefs with traditional ones can foster unbiblical practices such as witchcraft. The combination of misguided theology and local superstitions result in millions of people with disabilities living without the true knowledge of Christ’s saving grace and love.

Spiritual Stigma

Around the world, many church members and leaders believe disabilities have spiritual causes, such as witchcraft, curses, punishment, and demon possession. This is due to both their interpretation of the Bible, as well as the widespread prevalence of traditional beliefs. These beliefs often lead to abusive practices, like painful exorcisms. Children with cerebral palsy have had their skin cut in multiple locations to “release the demons.” Some individuals will forgo professional medical care because pastors have told them it shows their faith and, in response, God will heal them. Other families stay away from the church when they have a disabled child due to fear of judgment from the church members.

Healing as a Sign of Faith

Baseline data from our disability advocacy programs indicate that 75% of pastors believe children with disabilities have been cursed and must be healed. Those who remain unhealed are often accused of lacking faith. This causes the child and their families to be further stigmatized and excluded. In some cases, pastors who have been “unable” to heal a disability have also been seen as lacking a connection to God and lost members of their congregation.

- 90% of people with disabilities lack access to the gospel around the world.
- 75% of pastors in our programs believe disabilities are caused by spiritual problems.

“There are some disabilities that can be healed through faith in healing prayers like mental disability which is caused by demons or witchcraft.”

~ Kenyan pastor, when asked about his view of disability causes and treatments

Death Because of Incorrect Theology



Winnie Gonah was one of the first teacher assistants hired by Kupenda. She assisted children with mobility issues at the Gede Special School and worked hard despite her ongoing battle with HIV.

When Winnie developed AIDS, she was desperate to be cured so she could continue caring for her children. Her pastor told her the only way she could be healed was to demonstrate her faith in God by no longer taking her medication. She did what the pastor asked and lost her life.

Winnie’s needless death revealed the danger of this kind of church belief and the potential it has to harm individuals and families impacted by disability. In response, Kupenda began strategically reaching out to Christians with education on the Bible’s mandate to include people with disabilities in church outreach, community, and leadership. As part of these trainings, we also provide information on the medical definitions, causes, and treatments for disabilities.

Kupenda's Church Engagement Activities

"Many of us pastors have not been responsible. We think very little about the disabled. But now it is a new beginning for us."

~ Pastor after participating in a disability workshop

Equipping Churches to Include Children with Disabilities

Kupenda strategically educates and empowers Christian leaders about disability within the framework of theology connected to suffering, healing, and the Luke 14 mandate to include people with disabilities in their churches. By drawing on participants' beliefs and experiences related to disability, Kupenda facilitates workshops, sermons, and classes to guide church leaders and congregants through the process of developing a compassionate, inclusive response to disability.

Our one-day **Pastor Disability Workshops** include:

- Presentations about disability definitions and causes,
- Discussions on the theology of healing and suffering,
- Scriptural references connected to people with disabilities,
- Testimonies of people with disabilities,
- Discussions about Christians' responsibility to be fully inclusive, and
- Creation of action plans to support and include people with disabilities.

Our **Disability Sermons** focused on "The Parable of The Great Banquet" (Luke 14) are shared with key churches, highlighting:

- How the banquet represents the church,
- Excuses people make for not participating in God's call, and
- The significance of inviting people with disabilities into the church.

Church leaders who are interested in a more in-depth understanding of disability ministry participate in our **12-week Disability Ministry Class** which uses Joni and Friends' *Beyond Suffering: A Christian View of Disability* curriculum. The course includes:

- Disability definitions, causes, and descriptions;
- History of disability and the church;
- Suffering and healing; and
- Overcoming obstacles and starting a disability ministry.

The Impact of Christ's Love

Through these activities, most church leaders' beliefs are transformed from thinking that people with disabilities are cursed and in need of healing to one that identifies them as people who are loved by God and deserve to be fully included in all aspects of church life.

When Christian leaders understand biblical texts about disability, along with biological causes and effective treatments, they influence their communities to have positive beliefs and actions towards people with disabilities. Many follow the text of Luke 14, literally going "into the streets and alleys of the town bringing in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame." They invite them to their churches assuring them they are welcome. They also share the truth about disability in their communities, refer children with disabilities to special needs professionals, volunteer at special needs schools, build wheelchair accessible ramps at their churches, organize parent support groups, fund medical and education needs, and advocate alongside families impacted by disability.

Our strategic outreach to churches ultimately results in more people with access to the gospel and a more complete body of Christ. We are truly sharing the "good news that will cause great joy for all the people." (Luke 2:10).

Christina's Story



Motivated by Kupenda's pastor disability workshop in Tanzania, Pastor Keke visited Christina and her family. Christina could not walk or talk and was referred to the pastor by a church member after he preached on disability.

Due to negative disability stigma, Christina's family refused to admit they had a child with a disability so Pastor Keke invited them to a crusade in their village where a boy with a visible disability was leading the music.

After witnessing the talents of a child with a disability like her daughter's, Christina's mother accepted Pastor Keke's invitation to attend church with Christina.

Although she was a Christian, she feared how the church would treat her disabled daughter, before meeting this pastor. Christina's mother was amazed at Christina's excited clapping and dancing from her wheelchair and told her husband.

When Christina's father, who was not a Christian, heard about Christina's joyful spirit at church he decided to see for himself. Since then he has become a Christian who regularly attends church. The family has also stopped hiding Christina and accepts and loves her as a child of God.

God works in amazing ways!

For more information:

Visit: www.kupenda.org

Contact: kupenda@kupenda.org

© 2021 Kupenda for the Children. All Rights Reserved.